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Courting risk

The attempt to understand youth cultures

STEPHEN DOBSON

Lillehammer University College, Norway

RITA BRUDALEN

Lillehammer University College, Norway

HILDE TOBIASSEN

Lillehammer University College, Norway

Abstract

Youth have been understood as progressing through formal education towards entrance into university or other forms of higher education. But, what of the informal curriculum and the manner in which youth are obsessed by it as a source of formative experiences? This article takes as an example of this the *grisefest* (pig party) of Norwegian youth in the final year of high school. Through examples such as these our goal is to develop a framework to understand how youth cultures, as sources of education, are ultimately connected with the desire to 'court risk'. Our conclusion is that, through such activities, we witness what is called 'learning by doing', where self-formation (*bildung*) and the gaining of a certain competence, not necessarily of a deviant character, are important elements and based upon the role of personal experiences.

Keywords

Nietzsche, pedagogy, risk, youth

This article is a follow-up to our project, entitled *Overcoming Nihilism Through Planned Normlessness. The Experience of Norwegian High School Youth* (Dobson et al., 2003). We continue to develop our views on based Nietzsche's pedagogy by focusing not upon nihilism, but risk. Accordingly, 'risk' becomes an important additional category in our developing understanding of Nietzsche's pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

You have made danger your calling,
there is nothing in that to despise.

Zarathustra, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1969)

In the recent work of Paul Smeyers and Bernt Lambeir (2001), the proposition is made that youth cultures cannot be understood if attitudes towards existential truth, such as the meaning of life and death, are not examined. They take their inspiration from Friedrich Nietzsche to understand how youth struggle to find meanings for their existence. For many youth, it is dance culture and the different forms of popular music provide the necessary guidance.

In a previous article (Dobson et al., 2003) we drew attention to Norwegian youth in the final year of high school, who pursued a number of activities considered normless and regarded as a necessary part of being a so-called *russ* (final year high school students). For example, drinking a crate of beer within a certain time limit, sleeping on a traffic roundabout for a night, drinking a bottle of wine as the sun rises and before it has fully crossed the horizon, and partying as much as possible between 1 May (Labour Day) and 17 May (National Constitution Day in Norway).

We interpreted the *russ* activities as a sign of planned normlessness. From a philosophical point of view, we argued that the central issue was a rite of passage where the planned aspect of the activity ensured that the normless revelry – observed by non-participants – did in fact rest upon its own set of internally generated norms. Moreover the *russ* activities performed an important educational task, in that they gave the participants a way of overcoming their own passive nihilism, to use a term proposed by Nietzsche. They actively shaped their existence.

We would argue that there lies a deeper reason for the youth cultivation of such activities. Inherent in the need to dance, drink excessively, party into the small hours and so on, is not so much a need to overcome nihilism in short moments of meaningful expression – the argument made by Smeyers and Lambeir (2001) and by ourselves in our earlier paper (Dobson et al. 2003) – but the desire to court risk.

Risk has become a fashionable term in sociology. Mainly due to the efforts of Ulrich Beck, a much-debated view has been that societies desire to reduce the risk of unforeseen accidents and effects, and yet continue to produce them in the pursuit of profit or other objectives (Beck, 1992, 1996). Beck's predominant focus on the societal level, besides betraying an interest in the maintenance of societies as socio-cultural and production systems, ignores how risks are actually lived by people in their everyday life. Thus, the analysis of societies as systems exposed and vulnerable to risks identifies how people are the products of the different systems in which they live, but, even if they are able to reflect over this and institute changes (Giddens,

1991), there is the sense that the lived character of experiences of risk are glossed over.

The lived experience of unexpected events and the risks that they entail can be transferred to an understanding of youth cultures as they are lived by youth. Is it not the fascination of courting risk that explains why many youth deliberately look to put themselves in danger – through drugs, rave culture, drinking and so on? Our view is that this desire to take risks also has implications for education. It moves the educational project outside of the formal institution of schooling and onto the streets. In the case of Norway, this is not merely an urban phenomenon but, for example, can be found in youth who travel from the cities to cultivate snowboarding on unprepared slopes. Some, at great risk to themselves, snowboard down small frozen rivers in forests. This is an extreme example of this desire to take risks, but many youth cultures are predicated on pushing participants to the limits of what adults consider safe and reasonable.

If education is moved from the formal educational sphere how are educationalists and youth researchers to understand it? The theories of many educationalists and social scientists – from Dewey to Foucault – are based upon coming to terms with the demands of formal, institutionalized frameworks of education. Even among Greek philosophers, it is arguably the desire to include youth in the adult society and the work of the pedagogue is confined to the formal framework of the gymnasium. If we are to understand the youth desire to court risk and in the process of learning about life – finding answers to existential questions, not necessarily merely about life and mortality, as suggested by Smeyers and Lambey – then we must look to other philosophers of education for inspiration.

We have sought inspiration from three of Nietzsche's texts – *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1969) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1996) – along with Erving Goffman's (a writer not normally considered of relevance to educationalists) in *Interaction Ritual* (1967) and *Strategic Interaction* (1970). We could also have returned to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1984) and found inspiration in his essay on the origin of the inequalities between men. But Rousseau lacks a fully-developed conceptual framework and his thoughts remain too embedded and obscured by his own personal projects, desires and dispositions. We could also have sought inspiration in the work of Norbert Elias (1986) on the civilization process. But we felt that his work suffers from always being guided towards finding a way of demonstrating that we are historically more controlled and less likely to yield to our desire to court risk in an unguarded manner. The desire to court risk is not so easily overcome by different projects of civilization and education.

From an educational perspective, the youth we studied were willing to court the risk of their unknown bodies/natures/selves, and to learn from the experience. In Norway we call this *erfaringspedagogikk* (learning by doing), to borrow a phrase inspired by Dewey. Practice is central to our conception. It breaks with classic behaviouristic conceptions of education because the youth, through reflection, have a significant opportunity to modify the form and content of their own learning agendas. This suggests parallels with problem-based learning and project work, but notably without the presence of adults (teachers) as role models and sources of authority.

To contextualize our argument and to provide an empirical platform for our analysis, inspired by Nietzsche, we will begin with an example from our research on

the *russ*. It has been deliberately chosen because it is not an example of extreme risk, with the inference that risk taking can be a more general, mass phenomenon.

PART I – THE *GRISEFEST* (PIG PARTY)

During the year-long planning that takes place before the 1–17 May celebrations each year, the final year high school students – known as *russ* – in Norway arrange a number of ritual festivities and other events. Of the latter is the revue theatre that each school puts on, based upon sketches written and performed by the students. The most notable festivity is the *grisefest* (pig party).

This party is similarly arranged by the students and can be found taking place throughout Norway in the spring. Each school arranges only one such party. Other parties take place in the course of the school year, but none are like this one. At the *grisefest* the ‘male pig’ and ‘female sow’ of the year are chosen from the high school students.

We (the five researchers in our group) arrived at 7pm on Friday evening, ahead of the revelers. Our role was to keep order among the revelers as the night progressed and attend to any who became ill. The youth had hired three professional bouncers to keep out local non-*russ* youth. We noted that the *russ* had not wanted their own parents to act as bouncers or keep order. This party took place in a village outside the main town in a rented community hall. The students arrived in two full busses.

Many of the *russ* had already been drinking. They had with them not food but plastic bags full of alcohol. The hired disc jockey was playing his music, and the youth either danced or sat at tables drinking.

The evening’s main event was the eating contest to decide the pig and sow of the year. First it was the turn of the girls. Only four were willing to try. The music stopped and everybody gathered around a table where they sat. For starters it was a mixture of tuna fish, cod liver oil and mashed crisps. The main course was more cod liver oil, HP sauce, raw eggs and liver pâté. Desert was cake, jelly and even more cod liver oil. Each girl had a large bucket to vomit into. Two of the girls gave up after throwing up. The other two vomited, but continued to eat. In the end one of them withdrew, and so there was a winner. In the boys contest there were two entrants. They also had the starter, main course and desert. They both survived to the deserts and then kept eating until one withdrew.

Food normally considered pleasurable (e.g. crisps and cake) and necessary (e.g. cod liver oil) was abused and mocked in what was reminiscent of a Roman food orgy ritual.

After this event the music was turned on and the drinking began once again. All were drinking without exception – and all to excess. Many became drunk and some found a corner to lie down in and sleep.

The other event of note involved us. We (five researchers) had looked after the youth inside the hall, while the professional bouncers stood at the doors. We established the kitchen area as a no-go area and it was here that we took the really drunk to sleep. We said to the friend of one of the very drunk girls, ‘it looks like your friend has been taking something else . . . drugs’. The friend became angry and fetched several of her friends. They all denied that their friend had taken drugs of any kind and said that she has only been drinking. We did not pursue the issue any further,

especially since there seemed to be no other such cases. The head of the youth celebrations for the year, and also in charge of the evening's *grisefest*, tried quieting the group of increasingly hysterical and angry girls. To us he said that it was not unusual for drugs to be found at high school parties, but, on this occasion, he did not think this was the case.

One boy, who had been drinking heavily for the first time, became drunk and slept for a couple of hours in the kitchen. He was worried that his parents might see him drunk.

Towards midnight there was no more alcohol. They had drunk everything. Many continued to dance or drink water – to quench their thirst. The party lasted until 1am and then the two buses arrived to collect the youth. In spite of the excessive consumption of alcohol, none of them had to be driven to the hospital.

PART II – COURTING RISK AND ACCOUNTING FOR IT

For several of those present – it would be fair to say the majority – it was the first time they had drunk so heavily. When asked beforehand why they were willing to knowingly risk drinking so much, the consensus was that they would be doing the same from 1 May until 17 May on an almost daily basis. It was therefore good to learn what it would be like.

This indicates a clear educational goal. We would, however, propose that there was an additional set of reasons – not necessarily identified by youth themselves, but nonetheless relevant to the issue of education and self-formation (*bildung*). They are all to do with courting risk in one form or another.

If we consider risk itself, we realize that it takes many different forms. There is what might be called 'extreme' risk. This could refer to diving off a steep mountain and then opening a parachute or snowboarding down iced rivers, rather than prepared slopes. Such people are raising the stakes. What we are talking about when we say courting risk is a more general and less life-threatening kind of risk. This could take the form of the kind of risk taking we witnessed in the above example. We are, therefore, interested in the kinds of risk that have a more mass character. Our ambition is analogous to that of Sigmund Freud in his book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1991), to make a phenomenon more general and not reserved for an elite or deviant group. It must be remembered that all Norwegian youth in their final year of high school will be included in such *russ* activities as the *grisefest*. Only a few choose not to participate.

The kind of risk experienced by the *russ* had less high stakes and the consequences of failure were less serious than for the more extreme sports outlined above. In the case of the *grisefest*, the results were simply a hangover or, more seriously, alcohol poisoning. This risk element is related to a certain loss of control, more specifically, a loss of self-control along with a loss of control over the outcome. Goffman considered this in his research into gambling practices. He observed how risk was related to chance and the willingness to seek what he called 'chanciness':

Chanciness . . . [the] individual must ensure he is in a position (or forced into one) to let go of his hold and control on the situation, to make in Schelling's sense a commitment. No commitment, no chance taking. (Goffman, 1967: 152)

Note the emphasis on commitment and making a conscious choice. The allusion was undoubtedly to Sartre. Courting risk in this context and also in ours was, thus, to let go of one's hold on the situation and to do so deliberately.

This does not mean, however, that one is totally vulnerable to contingency. As Goffman noted, gambling always took place within a strictly governed framework based upon actors agreeing to obey and maintain certain norms through a series of demarcated phases. Thus, gambling involved the following phases (Goffman, 1967: 154): squaring off (bets placed), determinative phase (when the action takes place, e.g. the horses ran), disclosive phase (when the outcome was revealed) and the settlement phase (winners received their winnings). In a later work, he delimited the phases with the following terms: assessment, decision making, course of action and pay-off (Goffman, 1970: 120). So even when the person let go of control on the situation they knew that they were safe and secure within these different phases – as long as they obeyed the norms for each phase and the combined chain of actions. They could, for example, not place bets in the disclosive phase or demand their money back, even if their horse had failed to win. In other words, it was a loss of self-control, somewhat paradoxically within a controlled framework.

If we look at the *griseifest* once again, we see how the youth lost control either as the alcohol gave rise to intoxication or the participants in the contest had eaten so much that they vomited uncontrollably.

The evening had its phases: arriving on the bus, drinking and dancing, the contest (as either participant or spectator), the end of the alcohol supply when only water remained (some slept), and, finally, the bus arriving to collect them. All were aware of these phases before the event. They also knew that we (researchers) were present to keep an eye on them and make sure no harm occurred. There was no chance of them being treated like alcoholics, who might find themselves sleeping in the gutter after too much alcohol.

So, the initiation into excessive drinking was a courting of risk. It was the risk of losing control and learning how to let go. And yet, it is important to note, that even though this learning took place outside a formal educational setting, it was not without its own kinds of norms and structure. Moreover, we saw little evidence of other forms of initiation. The youth showed little general interest in sexual relations or drugs – even though the latter may or may not have been present in one particular case. Our impression was that the most important experiences the youth had during the evening were connected to alcohol. And through alcohol they were able to bond socially with each other.

They knew beforehand that they might get alcohol poisoning, have a giant hangover, and become really sick. They knew that these were experiences would prepare them for the *russ* period (between 1–17 May) – gaining new-found knowledge of themselves and intoxication. So knowing that intoxication takes on different, and sometimes dangerous, forms, why then were they still willing to court this kind of risk and the loss of control it entailed?

Goffman was of the opinion that an activity normally considered unproblematic can – sometimes without warning, or alternatively in a planned manner – become problematic and as a result consequential. As he puts it:

Such activity I call fateful, although the term eventful would do as well, and it is this kind of chanciness that will concern us here . . . It must be admitted that although free time and well-managed work time tend to be unfateful, the human condition is such

that some degree of fatefulness will always be found. Primordial bases of fatefulness must be reckoned with. (Goffman, 1967: 164)

Two points are worth noting with respect to Goffman's observation. First, that chanciness is not merely to do with letting go of control. It is also to do with the occurrence of fatefulness or eventfulness. By this he meant that events in gaining a problematic character became a consequence for later actions. This idea would also seem to cover the manner in which the high school youth (*russ*) at the *griseifest* made the normal event of drinking into something problematic and a source of consequences for their later actions – the hangover on the following day and also a learning experience in preparation for the period between 1–17 May.

Another way of putting this is to say that in making it fateful – problematic and of consequence – they are making it into a risk-laden event characterized by different possible outcomes and a clear prior knowledge that they were courting the risk entailed by intoxication and loss of control.

The first answer to the question (why they were still willing to court this risk?) is that they were willing to make an activity – drinking to excess, eating to excess – into an event with future consequences.

The second point to note is how Goffman connected fateful events with the human condition with a primordial base. This could be interpreted to mean that humans – because of their biological natures – were willing to seek out events characterized by risk. Was Goffman, therefore, guilty of a kind of biological determinism in the desire to account for fateful and risk laden activity? Perhaps. We have sought an answer to this question and to the question of the desire to experience risk, in the work of Nietzsche.

In works such as *Beyond Good and Evil*, he presented a 'physio-psychology' to account for the activity of man as biological and, hence, drive based (aphorism) (Nietzsche, 1973: aphorism 23). In an earlier aphorism in the book (aphorism 12) he suggested that the individual had a 'mortal soul' – the soul being understood to be the 'social structure of the drives and emotions'. Put differently, he presented a version of vitalism to account for the manner in which man was forced to obey his corporeal drives. The most important of these for Nietzsche was the physiological will to power. In, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1969), he can once again be found reflecting on the will to power.

For example, in the section entitled, *Of Self-overcoming*, Zarathustra can be found saying the following:

But wherever I found living creatures, there too I heard the language of obedience . . .

In all commanding there appeared to me to be an experiment: and a risk: and the living creature always risks himself when he commands. (Nietzsche, 1969: 137)

It is important that Nietzsche envisaged not only man seeking to command others, but also, in the one and same action, they were listening to the command of their own bodies. And the commanding element is the will to power. More specifically, this will to power is the will to be master – present in servant as well as ruler. The lesser (the servant), thus, surrenders to the greater in order to then be master over the weaker still. The greater (the master) in Zarathustra's words is willing to 'encounter risk and danger and play the dice of death' (1969: 138). What he means, in our opinion, is not death per se. It is, instead, that one is willing to risk the life that one has in order to overcome it and embrace a new and different life.

Put differently and close to what we are seeking to understand, the pursuit of the will to power is to listen to one's own drives. It involves the courting of risk – the risk that involves a strong obedience to oneself and in the process daring to overcome oneself.

In the context of the *russ* we have been looking at during the *griseifest*, the desire to court risk becomes a way of expressing a will to power – the will to power seen in their desire to be more obedient to their own bodies. Paradoxically they become drunk and lose control of their own bodies in the process. But it could also be interpreted to mean that, when intoxicated, they are listening to their own bodies and able to express themselves in a more unconstrained manner – in such a manner that their powers of reason are not able to repress the desire for such unconstrained expression.

When intoxicated the normal constraints on self-expression and self-control are relaxed, somewhat paradoxically as one is more controlled and obedient to the body. Nietzsche in his early text, *The Birth of Tragedy*, describes how the *principium individuationis* (principle of independent man) of non-intoxicated man collapses when under the influence of narcotic draughts, singing and dancing and by implication alcohol: 'Dionysian emotions awake, and as they grow in intensity everything subjective vanishes into complete self-forgetfulness' (Nietzsche, 1967: 36).

In other words, the alcohol allows for less-constrained expression and the self can overcome its normal individual, ego-centric based character. The self becomes collective – as seen at the *griseifest* when the girls sought to collectively defend their friend accused of taking drugs.

In talking of self-forgetfulness we once again arrive at our point of departure. We began by quoting Goffman: chanciness defined as the letting go of the hold and control of the situation. And when this occurs it entails a loss of the *principium individuationis*, which is dominant when sober. Moreover, it makes it possible for youth to express a less-constrained identity – as they are obedient to the will to power of their own bodies under the influence of alcohol. In losing touch with their normal

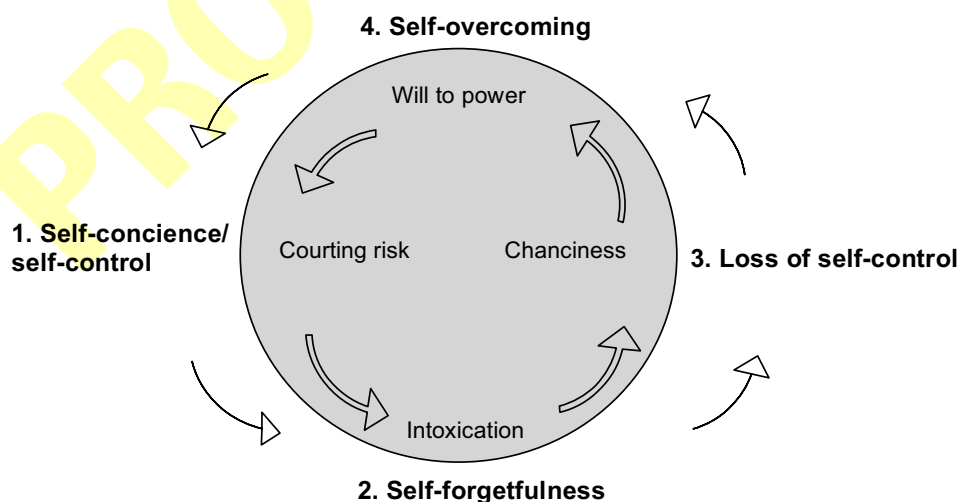


Figure 1 From courting risk to self-overcoming

sense of self they are able to experience a sense of self-overcoming – irrespective of how brief it might be.

The diagram below summarizes our argument. The *grisefest* gives participants the opportunity of courting risk and this, in turn, entails a chain of connected experiences. In the following section we will discuss the educational potential of courting risk.

As is shown in the Figure 1, at the outset, novice *russ* possess a certain self-conscience/self-control (1). Courting risk through intoxication leads them to self-forgetfulness (2). Through the intoxication and chanciness they experience a loss of self-control (3). The loss of self-control leads to what Nietzsche identifies as ‘will to power’ (understood as an obedience to their own bodies), and permits the experience of self-overcoming (4) and the return to an enhanced self-conscience/self-control.

PART III – DISCUSSION AND THE KIND OF LEARNING INVOLVED

Our argument is quite simple: in courting risk, youth are able to experience a kind of learning rooted in a self-overcoming of their normal sense and experience of self.

We are suggesting a kind of learning that takes place outside the normal school-based curriculum. At first sight it might appear that we are ignoring the dangerous effects of alcohol. Many parents are far from happy about the *grisefest*. And it cannot be forgotten that it is not unknown for ambulances to be called out to take the very ill to hospital – to have their stomachs pumped. It is not our intention to imply that alcohol is not without its harmful effects. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a form of learning in this collective *grisefest* party.

- Youth learn what excessive drinking entails and this is important in terms of giving them the opportunity to find out where and when their personal limits to alcohol are crossed. Put in educational terms, they develop a kind of self-competence that will be of use on later occasions.
- The knowledge acquired is based upon self-engendered experience and not upon some theoretical, ‘received’ lectures/lessons on the dangers of alcohol – as might have been one of their primary acquaintances with the effects of alcohol in the formal, school-based educational sphere. In other words, the *grisefest* was the opportunity for ‘learning by doing’. A kind of experience based pedagogy – *erfarings pedagogi* as it is termed in Norwegian. As in problem-based education and project work, the youth set their own agendas, but adult role models and figures of authority, such as teachers, are absent.
- The participants are motivated by what we have called a desire to ‘court risk’. It is the risk of excessive drinking and the after-effects. But it is also the risk of losing control of the situation. In losing control of the situation one can experience several other kinds of so-called risks. For example, the risk of *failure*, and by that we mean not achieving your goal, and in this process learning about your self, your boundaries, your strengths – and weaknesses.
- The learning is not, however, based upon courting risk in a situation with few boundaries or norms. This is one of the important things to note: the risk courted is contextualized in a ‘framed’ activity – a term coined by Goffman

(1974) to denote how activity is always framed by distinct norms and phases. All participants (and spectators/observers) are aware of these norms. For example: we (researchers) were present not to punish them for over-drinking, but to ensure that if they needed assistance it would be offered. But our attitude was totally different when we suddenly suspected the presence of drugs. If we had found clear evidence of drugs this would have been to transgress the norms governing the evening's activity.

- In losing control of the situation they experience a self-forgetfulness and this is the source of what we would call – to borrow a term from Nietzsche – self-overcoming.

Self-overcoming is an important concept in any philosophy of education because it focuses attention on self-formation (*bildung*). What is special about our conception of self-formation is that it is, paradoxically, based upon self-forgetfulness and loss of control within a context marked by its own set of norms and controls. It is, therefore, important to create situations in which the self can relax and open itself to new experiences – experiences entailing a learning to be other and, hence, self-overcoming.

It could be the case that these experiences are oiled by the presence of alcohol, dancing, partying and a non-formal, school-based context. Can schools create such experiences without having to seek the informality and intoxication of our example? Should they seek to create experiences of self-forgetfulness and loss of control? These questions might be open to debate.

A second issue worthy of debate is our argument, inspired by Goffman's point on a primordial desire to seek the fateful/chanciness and Nietzsche's view of a vitalism framed as a will to power guiding human, that courting risk is something that, in a sense, 'naturally' directs us towards events characterized by the risk of losing control. Addressing this issue remains outside the bounds of this article, but could be addressed if the attempt to look in more depth at the role of human drives moves us beyond the question of education and into the realms of a different discipline? Not necessarily. Consider Theodor Adorno's (1998) famous essay, 'Education After Auschwitz'. In this he drew upon Freud's view of repressed drives/instincts returning to feed the anti-civilization of Auschwitz. Adorno's goal was clear: to highlight the role of human drives and how they could lead people to behave in a bestial manner. In our argument we have also sought to show how youth can consume excessive alcohol, such that they cease to be human in the sense of rationality and sobriety. They are not necessarily bestial – although some would argue that when drunk we are in fact precisely this. However, what occurs, whether bestial or not, is that the human drives of youth are expressed more openly and directly. In terms of Nietzsche's conception, the will to power is revealed in all its openness, and in the terms of Goffman, the actors return to their primordial selves.

Returning to Nietzsche once again, let us close our argument still searching for the road towards our 'sacred yes' (1969: 55). Nietzsche laid down a challenge:

And so we necessarily remain a mystery to ourselves, we fail to understand ourselves, we are bound to mistake ourselves. Our eternal sentence reads: 'Everyone is furthest from himself' – of ourselves, we have no knowledge . . . (Nietzsche, 1996: preface)

The *griseft* teaches us that it is possible to take up this challenge and to learn from

the experience. It entails courting risk, loss of control of situations, self-overcoming. But we get closer to ourselves (or at least we think this is the case). And is that not something educationalists and social scientists have always dreamed of?

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STEPHEN DOBSON worked with refugees for 13 years and currently he is a senior lecturer in education at Lillehammer University College, Norway. His most recent book is called *Cultures of Exile and the Experience of Refugeeeness* (Peter Lang, 2004). Other publications include: *The Urban Pedagogy of Walter Benjamin. Lessons for the 21st Century* (Goldsmiths Press, 2002), and *The Pedagogy of Ressentiment*, co-authored with Oliver Halland, (Lillehammer University College, 1995). His recent essays are: 'Assessing PowerPoint Presentations: Mood and Narrative Entwinement' (forthcoming); 'Konvolut O – The Dialectical Image of Gambling and Prostitution' (2005); and 'Looking for Stories in Las Vegas' (2005). Address: Lillehammer University College, N-2626 Lillehammer, Norway. [email: stephen.dobson@hil.no]

RITA BRUDALEN [email: ritaa@skjellerud.com] and **HILDE TOBIASSEN** [email: hilde.tobiassen@stud.hil.no] are both post-graduate students of education, working on Nietzsche pedagogy. They are based at Lillehammer University College, Norway.

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